# Deuteronomy 32:8–9 and the Old Testament Worldview

Deuteronomy 32:8 describes Yahweh's dispersal of the nations at Babel and his resultant *disinheriting* of those nations, giving them over to other, lesser gods (*elohim*). Deuteronomy 32:9, by contrast, states that the nation of Israel belongs to Yahweh alone:

> When the Most High apportioned the nations as an inheritance, when he divided up humankind, he established the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. But the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage.

English translations based on the traditional Hebrew text of the Old Testament read "sons of Israel" instead of "sons of God." The phrase "sons of God" comes from manuscripts of Deuteronomy found among the Dead Sea Scrolls—scrolls much older than the traditional "received" text. The reference to Babel in Deuteronomy highlights an important point regarding this manuscript disagreement. The division of the nations at the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9) is connected to the Table of Nations of Gen 10, which directly precedes it. The Table of Nations catalogs 70 nations but *does not include Israel*. Why? Because Israel did not exist at the time of the Babel event. This makes the reference to "sons of Israel" in Deut 32:8 illogical and unsustainable: "sons of God" was most likely changed to "sons of Israel" sometime after the Jewish community—in response to the new Christian church and its use of the Septuagint—"standardized" the Hebrew text in the second century AD.

## The Israelite View of the Nations and Their Gods

Deuteronomy 32:8–9 is fundamental for understanding the worldview of Old Testament Israel. These two verses explain both the existence of the foreign pantheons and their inferiority to Yahweh. A parallel passage to Deut 32:8–9, Deut 4:19–20, will provide some needed context.

> And beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them whom the LORD your God has allotted to all the nations under the whole heaven. But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day.

Deuteronomy 4:19–20 and 32:8–9 represent two sides of the same coin. In Deuteronomy 32:8–9, God apportions the nations to the sons of God; here, however, God allots the gods to the nations. Israelites, in other words, believed that Yahweh, their own supreme, unique God, sentenced the nations and their gods to each other. At Babel, God, like a father dismissing and disinheriting his children, judges all the nations for their disobedience (Gen 11:1–9). Then, in the very next chapter, He calls Abraham (Gen 12:1–3), effectively starting over in creating an earthly human family for Himself.

These other gods, which Deut 32:8 refers to as “the sons of God,” were members of Yahweh’s heavenly host. Scripture elsewhere condemns both the members of the nations and their gods for disloyalty and corruption (Psa 82).

Linking the pagan Gentile nations and their gods in this way gave the biblical worldview its particular focus on making the Israelites distinct from other nations and their gods. These spiritual boundaries between Israel and every other nation indicated that loyalty to other nations could not be separated from loyalty to their gods. The distinctions even extended to physical geography, which for the Israelites was cosmic geography.

Consider two examples of these spiritual implications: circumcision and the law. Circumcision reminded Israel that they were Yahweh’s portion. Other nations practiced circumcision, but it did not carry the same significance for them that it did for Israel. For Israel, circumcision was sexual and procreative in nature and thus symbolized the nation’s birth via Yahweh’s miraculous intervention. In choosing Abraham and Sarah, Yahweh had disinherited all other human nations.

Likewise, Israelite laws share many features with other ancient Near Eastern cultures, but the rationale for the laws is unique to Israel. In Israelite religion the laws are inextricably tied to an everlasting covenant relationship between Yahweh and the people. This perspective, derived from the Israel’s unique status as Yahweh’s inheritance, does not appear in other law codes.

The concept of cosmic geography is illuminated by other examples. Israel, as Yahweh’s inheritance, was holy ground. Similarly, the territory of other nations, according to Yahweh’s decree, belonged to other gods. But in the course of Old Testament history, Israel had become enslaved to the Egyptians and required supernatural deliverance from Egypt and its gods. To subsequently inherit the promised land—now occupied by nations who worshiped other gods—Israel would have to reclaim its landed inheritance by holy war. Thus, once in the land, Israelites still believed that their land belonged exclusively to Yahweh and was His sacred domain: other nations, even if they were in Israel, were under the dominion of evil, lesser gods.

First Samuel 26 reflects this belief. David, whom Saul is pursuing, feels distress at not being on holy ground:

> Saul recognized David’s voice and said, “Is this your voice, my son David?” And David said, “It is my voice, my lord, O king.” And he said, “Why does my lord pursue after his servant? For what have I done? What evil is on my hands? Now therefore let my lord the king hear the words of his servant. If it is the LORD who has stirred you up against me, may he accept an offering, but if it is men, may they be cursed before the LORD, for they have driven me out this day that I should have no share in the heritage of the LORD, saying, ‘Go, serve other gods.’ ”

David links being in Israel with the ability to worship Yahweh. Why? Is David ignorant of the fact that God can be anywhere? No—David knows that Israel is Yahweh’s portion and that Yahweh has

disinherited all other territory and handed it over to the other gods. David cannot worship without being on holy ground. David wants nothing to do with ground outside of Israel, where other nations worship their gods. Rather, he desires to be in the sacred space of Yahweh.

Another curious incident reflects this same aspect of Israel's worldview. After Elisha the prophet heals him, Naaman, commander of the army of Syria (a domain outside Israel) makes a strange request of the prophet:

> Then Naaman said, "If not, please let there be given to your servant two mules' load of earth, for from now on your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god but the LORD. In this matter may the LORD pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, the LORD pardon your servant in this matter." He said to him, "Go in peace."

Naaman's seemingly odd plea for dirt clearly reflects the Deut 32 worldview. He wants to ensure he worships the God of Israel from now on. And since the only way he can be sure he is worshiping the true God is to worship him on holy ground, he decides to take some of it with him.

## The Israelite Worldview in the New Testament

The idea that corrupt gods (sons of God) both populate and control certain geographical regions was still prevalent in the NT era. Paul used geographical terminology to describe the heavenly host: principalities, rulers, thrones, authorities, powers, dominions (Eph 6:12). The most dramatic example, however, may be the Pentecost event in Acts 2, where God begins to reclaim all the nations for Himself. God, in other words, has not forever abandoned the nations. Even in the Old Testament, Israel was to be a kingdom of priests, mediators between the disinherited nations and the true God. Israel's laws, prophets, and Scriptures all convey knowledge of the true God to the nations. In this sense, Christ became the ultimate mediator—reconciling every nation to God.

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## See Also:

Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God

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